# MEETING REPORT

**Thursday, September 12, 2002**

## Project Steering Committee
## Meeting No. 5 – TOD Design Options, Final Preferred TOD Scenarios, and Feasibility Analysis

***6:00 - 8:00 p.m.***
***Auditorium, West End Multi-Service Center (170 Heights Boulevard)***

The fifth and final Steering Committee meeting for the Inner Katy Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) Study was opened at approximately 6:15 p.m. by Patricia Rincon-Kallman, Assistant Director of the City of Houston Planning & Development Department.

Meeting discussions and consultant presentations covered topics including:

- Design Opinion Survey Results
- Preferred TOD Scenarios
- Feasibility Analysis

**Results of Design Opinion Survey**

Joe Webb of Joe Webb Architects reported on the results of the visual survey conducted at the last Steering Committee meeting. At that meeting, 115 images were presented and participants were asked to score each in terms of accessibility, activities, comfort and sociability. The committee scored 58 images "above average". Of these 58, 12 highlighted all four elements. The maximum score of any image was 45. The highest scoring pictures often included water amenities (fountains, courtyards). Other aspects of high scoring images included mixed uses, practical destinations (including grocery stores), development on a human scale, buildings with an attractive street face, and public spaces encouraging personal interactions.

With regard to parking, Mr. Webb stated that in an automobile-oriented district one car uses three to five parking spaces in the course of a day. But with more compact and mixed-use development, a visitor can park once and walk to subsequent destinations. The parking itself can be made more attractive by screening the edges, putting it below or above the street face, or otherwise making it fit into the local environment.

Mr. Webb also presented preliminary sketches of how preferred visual elements could be implemented in a transit corridor. The sketches featured multi-use development including multi-family housing close to a boulevard or street with a transitway, new or rehabilitated structures that create new public spaces, and neighborhood social spaces near parks and housing. The sketches did not yet incorporate transit vehicles. The intention was to provide three-dimensional examples so the committee could begin to visualize the actual look of the TOD scenarios they helped to create using two-dimensional maps and aerials.

Comments were then received from the Steering Committee. Several individuals said they generally liked what they saw and thought the presentation represented their thinking. One committee member said he thought a split transit alignment using Washington Avenue and

Center Street could create an opportunity for high-profile, boulevard-style improvements and green space in the blocks between Washington and Center. Another person suggested showing more variety in the treatments (texture and style) of buildings, which is a desirable aspect of the existing Inner Katy development pattern. Someone else wondered what the other side of the street face would look like and what type of transition area there would be between the new densely-developed boulevard and adjacent neighborhoods. Another individual mentioned that angle parking has worked well in certain areas and is desirable for small retailers and customers wanting to drive right up to a business. He suggested that angle parking be incorporated into the design images versus just parallel parking.

Another person asked how the preferred design elements can be accomplished – how do you encourage private property owners to develop in this manner? A starting point is to create a district or area plan, working with area businesses and residents to create a consensus. The Main Street Corridor was presented as an example. Ms. Rincon-Kallman noted that standards established for the public right-of-way can be supplemented by incentives (e.g. tax breaks, fast-tracking variances or other paperwork) for businesses that develop in accordance with the plan. Another example of how it can work is the Near Northside plan, which includes design guidelines that will be presented to City Council for adoption by ordinance.

**Preferred TOD Scenarios**

Bret Keast of Wilbur Smith Associates presented the final preferred TOD scenarios, one for each alignment based on the committee's feedback on the two alternatives per alignment presented and discussed at the last meeting. Mr. Keast highlighted the following features of and contrasts between the two scenarios:

Alignment B

- Major concentrations of development at each end of the corridor ("dumbbell" pattern)
- Greater intensity of land use and denser development near the transit stops
- Higher density then Alignment C

Alignment C

- Major concentrations of development at each end of the corridor ("dumbbell" pattern)
- More single-family residential use
- Less dense overall then Alignment B
- Lesser scale of land use intensity and commercial use near transit stops compared to Alignment B

Mr. Keast noted that results of this study will be funneled into a much longer review and decision process. Community support for Alignment C, as expressed at the last Steering Committee meeting, will be only one factor in the final decision. Economic potential will be a big driver, as will technical constraints, environmental issues, constructability of transit, and integration with the rest of the METRO system. Both options, not just the

committee's Alignment C preference or the consultant team's likely Alignment B recommendation, will go forward for further analysis beyond the current study.

Barbara Koslov of S. R. Beard & Associates (METRO consultant) distributed a handout highlighting technical engineering and operational issues that will be considered in final selection of appropriate transit improvements for the Inner Katy corridor. These issues include:

- Design and cost constraints associated with grade separations (e.g., providing an overpass for a transit line over a roadway, or vice versa)
- Impact on traffic flow of transit in the street right of way (space requirements for transit can also eliminate on-street parking)
- Impacts of speed constraints (e.g., 30 mph on portions of Washington Avenue) and the number and spacing of transit stops
- System connectivity – any potential Inner Katy line has to work with the rest of the METRO system

**Feasibility Analysis**

Jon Roberts of TIP Development Strategies presented draft feasibility analysis findings for both potential transit alignments as well as the overall study area. The analysis measured market viability and economic feasibility of the two alignments and associated TOD scenarios. The goal was to estimate cost factors and benefits. Cost factors include infrastructure costs, operating costs and land acquisition. Of these, it is most difficult to arrive at clear numbers for land acquisition, so this cost factor was considered neutral (or not likely to be significantly different) in the comparison of the two alignments. Economic benefits were measured in terms of sales and property tax revenues, employment, and diversification of the area's industry mix.

Mr. Roberts stated that when considering the motivation for transit investment, freeway congestion could best be addressed by having no transit stops in the neighborhood so the commute time by transit would be minimized. The purpose of putting in light rail, he said, is the development opportunities that such transit corridors can offer. Therefore, if there is no development potential, there is no reason to build light rail transit (LRT). The feasibility analysis is designed to confirm if there is development potential associated with the possible Inner Katy transit alignments.

From an economic perspective, Alignment B creates the highest positive impact. Mr. Roberts pointed out that development potential depends foremost on the presence of stations. Development occurs (after LRT development) where development is already present (before LRT development).

Land acquisition and costs to extend infrastructure may offset benefits, as could factors such as lot size, necessary construction of new road networks, brownfield mitigation (addressing environmental contamination on potential development sites), and capital costs of rail. These have not been factored into the analysis.

A question was posed, "How big a wild card is land acquisition?" Mr. Roberts responded that, using posted real estate values for the study area, most scenarios examined are similar, with the exception of areas nearer downtown.

Mr. Roberts presented details of the feasibility analysis assumptions and results. A key theme was that population density drives the predicted economic impact while also indicating greater transit ridership potential.

The number of new housing units that can be absorbed in the corridor is dependent on sub-regional growth (what is happening relative to the rest of Houston), proposed densities, and national trends. The proposed densities in the Inner Katy TOD scenarios are four times what current forecasts for the area suggest. This does not mean they are not feasible. Mr. Roberts noted that the forecasts may be based on 1990-2000 trends, while more recent trends and market conditions are more in line with – but still lower than – the proposed increases in population growth and density. The effect of achieving or not achieving this density will have large ripple effects.

Employment growth is based on the number of people working, how much they are making, property tax, sales tax, and the industry mix. All these factors benefit from high density since jobs added are proportional to population density. Without four- or five-story mixed use/residential buildings, predicted job growth will not occur. Retail sales are similarly tied to population. Alignment B predicts more people and therefore more sales generated.

On the cost side, Mr. Roberts presented a wide range of estimates for capital and operating costs for transit. Based on a General Accounting Office (GAO) study of light rail and bus rapid transit (BRT), capital costs range from $85.5 to $891.2 million, while operating costs are in the range of $89-$434 per revenue mile for LRT and $56-$143 per revenue mile for BRT. Alignment C is cheaper in terms of operating cost.

Mr. Roberts then took questions and comments from Steering Committee members. These included:

- Higher density development is not realistic for the area between Shepherd and Heights along Alignment B.
- With this insight into how density drives economic impact, the decisions on alignments that were made in previous meetings and at the Development Scenarios Workshop might have come out differently. At the workshop, we were directed to locate the transit stations first before placing development around them, but maybe we should have placed the stations based on where higher density development was really feasible.
- What is the assumed "sphere of influence" for stations? One-quarter mile (reasonable walking distance).
- Will future development follow the type of existing development? Mr. Roberts said that the type and quantity of future development are related to the infrastructure improvements that would be required. Development that is consistent with existing infrastructure is more likely to occur.

- Political feasibility is another important factor along with economic considerations. Political support will depend on proposed alignments, mode selection and operating characteristics (e.g., speed for longer-distance commuters). Some elected leaders do consider relief of freeway congestion as the prerequisite for federal funding of transit projects. Future extensions of Houston's new LRT system will also depend on the support of voters across the entire METRO service area.
- Did you address ways of paying for the infrastructure? Mr. Roberts said that the city's own capital investments will have a large influence on private investment. (The Implementation chapter in the final study report will address funding options.)
- It was noted earlier in the study that some developers have "moved on" to other areas of town where development is quicker and easier. Since METRO is studying various potential transit corridors around the city, Inner Katy might end up competing with other "hot" areas like Uptown/Galleria that could also have new LRT lines where developers are eager to build their TOD-style projects. Mr. Roberts agreed that the projected development scenarios for Inner Katy would not occur in a vacuum.

**Council Member Appreciation**

District H City Council Member Gabriel Vasquez, who was instrumental in initiating the Inner Katy TOD Study, thanked everyone for attending and thanked the Steering Committee and consultant team for their efforts. He said the process started with a vision, is concluding with the consultants reminding everyone that "Vision Matters," and the vision for the Inner Katy must be kept alive and moved forward. Thanks to this study, METRO will know what the community is interested in regarding potential future transit investments.

**Next Steps**

Ms. Koslov provided a handout describing the steps METRO will take after this study is concluded. METRO will wrap up its own preliminary study of Inner Katy by the end of January 2003. The agency recognizes the need for transit stations in Inner Katy. METRO will then assemble its individual corridor studies into a system plan. Final approval of a system plan by the METRO Board is expected in July 2003. With a system plan in place, METRO will come back to the community to work on details of the next steps for Inner Katy. This could be a formal Alternatives Analysis, or not. Detailed feasibility and environmental studies would also be required prior to any final funding or construction decisions.

The final Town Hall meeting for the Inner Katy TOD Study is scheduled for October 16, 2002 at 6:00 p.m. at Hogg Middle School. The meeting will begin with a reception and provide an opportunity for the public to review and comment on study outcomes.